

Shining stars

Students thrive in Honors Program's challenging curriculum and nurturing environment

Wherever you set the bar, honors students will jump higher. That's how Gene Takle describes the drive and determination of these students at Iowa State University. As the interim faculty director of the Honors Program, he's committed to students and creating an environment that fosters academic excellence.

"We believe very strongly that in honors education, our students should actively participate in their learning. Most honors classes are limited to 25 students, which allows for more discussion, more interaction, and the opportunity to explore a wider range of ideas," Takle explained. "We challenge students to design their own academic programs and require that they take a higher level of responsibility to design an active-learning experience. Honors students really respond to this challenge."

Simply put, honors courses are not *more* work – they're *better* work. Takle and the rest of the staff work diligently to both maintain the traditional high quality of the ISU Honors Program and to implement new initiatives, such as expanded undergraduate research. But they couldn't do it without private support.

"We are very dependent on and grateful

for the philanthropic support we get from friends and alumni. Without those funds, there are a lot of things we would not be doing," said Brandy Cunningham, assistant director for the Honors Program. "The Honors Student Board, the student organization for all honors students, operates solely on private support. The students plan many academic, cultural, and social activities every year, and it's a huge part of the community and student experience in honors."

Private funds were responsible for the recent construction of the new Jischke Honors Building that houses the program. "We have this beautiful, wonderful building that has space for students to gather, study, and socialize," said Cunningham. "The students love being here."

Because of the tremendous success of the Honors Program and the impact it creates, the university has identified it as a fundraising priority. Additional private support would help the program improve and expand in a variety of ways. Initiatives aimed at increasing undergraduate and summer research opportunities, funding to assist

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students with study-abroad expenses, and the expansion of honors course offerings are all areas of concentration. It's an investment that has a positive effect on the whole campus.

"When you have a critical mass of students in the classroom who have designed their own active-learning program, they tend to ignite discussions that get other students involved as well," Takle said. "Honors students tend to be campus leaders

and add to the learning environment on campus."

With about 1,300 current student members and about 4,000 graduates of the program, the Honors Program is constantly working to recruit the best and brightest. As a result, the quality of the program helps boost the reputation of the entire university.

"Criteria set by *U.S. News and World Report* for determining a university's ranking include A.C.T. and S.A.T. scores of the incoming class," Takle said. "High-ability students who seek out ISU because of the innovative opportunities through the Honors Program increase the average scores of incoming students and subsequently improve our national ranking."

Chris Deal, whose tenure as Government of the Student Body vice president recently ended, said the Honors Program is appealing in many ways. "The professors are always very engaging and I feel like I get a lot more out of those classes," he said. "When you're in a class with other honors students, you want to push yourself to do better, and most of us are trying to beat each other. But we also help each other and meet for study sessions before tests. It's just a really great atmosphere."

Ruth Neil, a senior in public service and administration in agriculture, agreed.

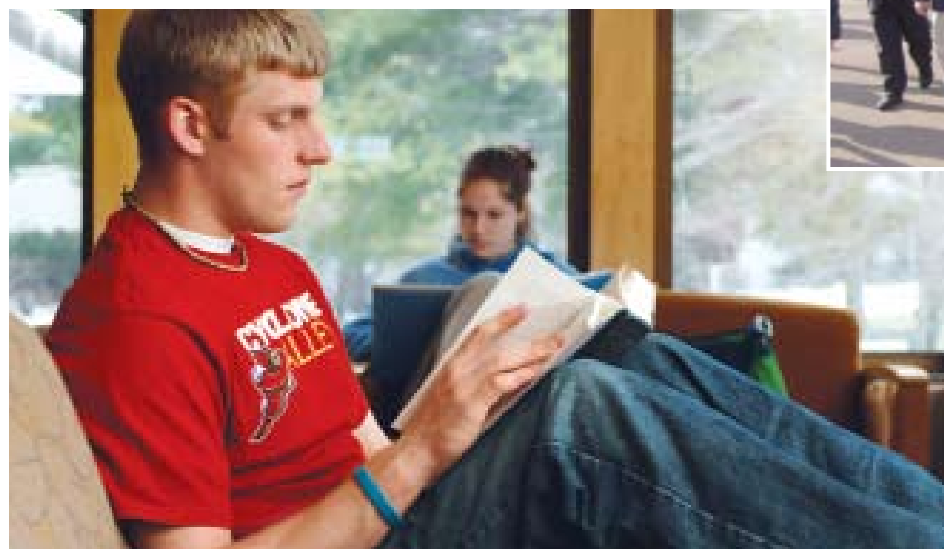
"It's definitely encouraging to be around other people who understand when you're disappointed that you got an A- in a class," she laughed. "We call that 'honors failing,' but you can't say that to most students because they'd laugh at you. Honors students understand."

The Honors Program helps students achieve academic excellence by providing a strong support system, a challenging curriculum and a smaller community within the larger institution. The Freshman Honors Program Seminar was created nearly 30 years ago as the first step in helping students make the transition into college life.



Above Ruth Neil, far right, walks with a group of team members past the White House. Neil, who is currently working in Washington D.C. as part of a semester-long internship at the National 4-H Council, is a licensed tour guide for the organization. She is also conducting research about Iowa 4-H history as part of her honors project while working in the nation's capital.

Left Chris Deal reads in the lounge area of the Jischke Honors Building. The building was designed to have a space where students could gather to study or just relax.



Trivia contest makes fun of complex questions

You'd expect honors students to enjoy trivia.

Every year, KQ, the ISU campus radio station, holds the trivia contest to end all trivia contests. It's a 26-hour quiz that reveals one question at a time, every six minutes.

"We stay up all night and take shifts gathering questions and working on problems," said Ruth Neil, a senior in public service and administration in agriculture. "It's incredibly wacky and fun."

This year, Neil's team from Anders House in Barton Hall won the contest by a 10-point margin. Here are just a few of the questions:

■ Decode this ACME code: HEHST GNUK CHOOG.

■ In what year was the requirement that area codes have a middle digit of 0 or 1 dropped?

■ Solve $Y'' + 2Y' + 10Y = 0$, $Y(0) = 1$, $Y'(0) = 2$, $Y' = dy/dt$.

■ What fish has a name whose Spanish translation is an anagram of its English name?

■ How many atoms are there in .350 mol of $C_6H_{12}O_6$?

■ How many ways are there for eight men and five women to stand in a line so no two women stand next to each other?

■ How many integers under one million have digits which sum to nineteen?

■ On "Sex & the City," how many times did Carrie go to the Hamptons?

"We're recognized nationally as having an outstanding Freshman Honors Program, and I do think it makes us more attractive to prospective students," said Cunningham. "It's a great way to introduce them to ISU and to the community and all it has to offer."

Students describe the curriculum as the best of both worlds. Smaller class sizes, more personal attention, and all of the opportunities available at a larger land-grant institution contribute to an exceptional college experience. The honors research mentorship program lends itself to this theory by giving freshmen the opportunity to conduct research with a faculty mentor their first year at Iowa State.

"It's a great way to get your foot in the door, not only as an undergraduate student, but as a freshman," said Deal, a junior in mechanical engineering. "Not very many people can say they've had that opportunity."

Not only is the opportunity available early in a student's college career, but the faculty and staff work to ensure it's a valuable and rich experience. "Students don't realize how much they're learning about

research at the freshman level, and they often don't realize how much responsibility they were given in the research project until they're upperclassmen," Takle explained. "It's an enormous growth opportunity."

Unlimited opportunities, hands-on experiences, and knowledgeable faculty and staff are all ingredients to a high-quality and successful Honors Program. As fundraising momentum builds, academic excellence and the students remain top priorities.

"The students are always our priority and the focus of our entire staff," Cunningham said. "It's a joy to work with them, and it's rewarding to see them succeed." □

Kim Davis is the assistant director of communications for the ISU Foundation.